IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend Claims 80, 87, 89, 91, 94, and 103-105 as follows:

1. – 69. (Cancelled)

70. (Previously presented) Saddle pad apparatus adapted to support a saddle while maintaining both substantially unimpeded movement of the spinal column of a living subject and a desirable balance of a saddle and rider, comprising:

a first pad disposed laterally to one side of said spine and a second pad disposed laterally to the other side of said spine so that said first and second pads straddle said spinal column and are sufficiently distant therefrom so that said saddle pad apparatus does not impede movement of the spinal column of said living subject by forming a space between said spinal column and said saddle pad apparatus, each of said pads being adapted to individually cooperate with a respective one of withers region gaps or recesses of the anatomy of the living subject;

wherein said gaps or recesses are disposed in the withers region of the subject; and

wherein said pads are placed at least partially within gaps or recesses in said withers region of said subject, said placement of said pads being such that said saddle and saddle pad apparatus is raised at least partly off of only said withers region of said subject, so as to substantially avoid contact of said saddle with the top of the withers, thereby substantially eliminating pressure points in said withers region and maintaining said balance.

71. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 70, further comprising a third and a fourth pad so that said apparatus comprises four discrete pads, two per side of the spine.

72. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 70, wherein at least one of said pads varies in thickness.

73. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 70, wherein said first and second pads are formed from a visco-elastic foam material.

74. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 70, wherein said first and second pads are disposed in pockets formed substantially between a first layer of material and a second layer of material.

75. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 74, wherein said first and second pads are made removable from said pockets via Velcro strips disposed at seams of said pockets.

76. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 74, wherein said first layer and second layer comprise sheepskin and a fiber-based material, respectively, said sheepskin being disposed to contact the skin of said living subject, said fiber-based material being disposed to contact said saddle.

77. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 76, wherein said living subject comprises an equine.

78. – 79. (Cancelled)

80. (Currently amended) Saddle pad apparatus adapted to support a saddle on a living subject, comprising:

a plurality of pads that distribute load from said saddle substantially evenly on said living subject to avoid contact with the living subject's spinal column over only a plurality of non-contiguous regions of said living subject's anatomy such that during riding said saddle is substantially stable around a rotational axis transverse to the longitudinal axis of the spinal column of said subject, said pads further being disposed only within individual ones of withers region recesses of said subject so as to elevate only a front portion of said saddle and saddle pad apparatus during riding while maintaining said substantial stability around said axis;

wherein said plurality of pads are disposed laterally to said spine in pockets formed substantially between a first layer comprising sheepskin having a pelt hair length between ¾ inch and 1 inch, and a second layer comprising a fiber-based material, said sheepskin being disposed to contact the skin of said living subject, said fiber-based material being disposed to contact said saddle.

81. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 80, wherein said plurality comprises four discrete pads, two per side of the spine, each of said four pads being adapted to cooperate with a recess or gap within the anatomy of the subject.

82. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 80, wherein at least one of said pads varies in thickness.

83. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 80, wherein at least a portion of said plurality of pads are formed from a visco-elastic foam material.

84. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 80, wherein said plurality of pads are made removable from said pockets via Velcro strips disposed at seams of said pockets.

85. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 83, wherein said living subject comprises an equine.

86. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 85, wherein said apparatus is further adapted to support said saddle while maintaining substantially unimpeded movement of the spinal column of said living subject.

87. (Currently amended) A saddle pad apparatus adapted for use with a saddle on a high-withered equine, comprising:

first and second substantially flexible elements having roughly the same shape, said first and second elements being bound together in at least a plurality of locations along their periphery, said first element comprising a sheepskin and being in direct contact with the skin of said equine; and

a plurality of compressible visco-elastic foam pad elements disposed between said first and second ~~flexibly~~ flexible elements, said pad elements straddling the spine of said equine ~~at a distance whereby~~ thereby causing said saddle pad apparatus to avoid ~~is not in~~ contact with the spinal column of said equine during riding[[,]] ;

wherein said pad elements are disposed and configured to substantially fill respective ones of gaps that occur on the anatomy of said high-withered equine in its withers region continuously during riding, thereby substantially relieving this region from excessive pressure and contact with said saddle in a gullet channel which would otherwise exist without said pad elements; and

wherein said unimpeded spine movement, said frustration of redisposition, and said first flexible element cooperate to provide reduced discomfort for said equine during said riding.

88. (Previously presented) The saddle pad of Claim 87, further comprising at least one peripheral ridge disposed substantially along a front or back periphery of said first and second elements, said peripheral ridge cooperating with an edge of said saddle to substantially frustrate relative motion between said saddle pad and said saddle in at least one direction during riding.

89. (Currently amended) A saddle pad adapted for use, with a saddle, on an equine, comprising:

first and second substantially flexible elements having roughly the same shape, said first and second elements being bound together in at least a plurality of locations along their periphery, said first element comprising sheepskin in direct contact with the skin of said equine and said second element comprising a fiber-based material disposed to contact said saddle;

a plurality of compressible visco-elastic foam pad elements disposed between said first and second flexible elements, said plurality of pad elements having a first shape and adapted to straddle the spine of said equine with at least a portion of said plurality disposed within said saddle pad and sufficiently distant from said spine such that said saddle pad elements support said saddle and said saddle pad above the spine of said equine thereby creating a spinal channel, said spinal channel enabling substantially unimpeded movement of said spine; ~~, the movement of the spine of said equine is being substantially unimpeded by said saddle and said pad elements during riding,~~

first and second restraining straps affixed to at least said second flexible element, said straps each being adapted for substantially concealed tethering to said saddle; and

at least one peripheral ridge disposed substantially along a front or back periphery of said first and second elements, said peripheral ridge cooperating with an edge of said saddle to substantially frustrate relative motion between said saddle pad and said saddle in at least one direction during riding;

wherein said pad elements are adapted to interface only with gaps formed in the withers region of said equine; said pad elements configured ~~so as~~ to prop up only a front portion of said saddle and saddle pad and provide a substantially invariant relationship between said saddle and said equine during mounted ambulation of said equine.

90. (Cancelled)

91. (Currently amended) A pad element comprising a plurality of substantially rounded edges adapted for use in a saddle pad, wherein said pad element is formed from a visco-elastic foam and is adapted for selective removal from said saddle pad by a user; [[and]]

wherein said pad element is particularly shaped to accommodate and fit substantially within a particular withers region recess on the anatomy of an animal on which said pad element and saddle pad is utilized; and

wherein continuous placement of said pad substantially within said withers region recess results in substantial lift of a saddle and said saddle pad placed thereon away from said withers region while maintaining balance and stability of said saddle for said user.

92. (Previously presented) The pad element of Claim 91, wherein said pad element has a plurality of densities associated therewith in its uncompressed state.

93. (Previously presented) The pad element of Claim 92, wherein said plurality of densities are substantially stratified with respect to the width dimension of said element.

94. (Currently amended) Apparatus adapted for use on high-withered animals, comprising:

a substantially flexible pad comprising a plurality of pockets formed substantially between a first layer;

comprising sheepskin and a second layer comprising fiber-based material, said sheepskin being disposed to contact the skin of said high-withered animals, said fiber-based material being disposed to contact a saddle;

a plurality of visco-elastic foam pad elements captured by respective ones of said pockets;

wherein said pad elements ~~and said pad~~ are disposed only within gaps created by said withers region continuously throughout riding, and said pad elements and said pad cooperatively form a raised feature element to raise only a frontal portion of a saddle and said apparatus disposed over top of said pad elements with respect to a withers region in order to mitigate tilting or rocking of the saddle.

95. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 94, further comprising a pad interface adapted to interface between said pad and said animal, said pad interface adapted to (i) dissipate localized pressure; (ii) dissipate heat; and (iii) dissipate moisture.

96. – 97. (Cancelled)

98. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 80, wherein said sheepskin comprises Australian Merino sheepskin.

99. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 80, wherein said sheepskin comprises a chemical treatments adapted to improve at least one of stain resistance or ultraviolet fading of said sheepskin.

100. (Previously presented) The apparatus of Claim 98, wherein said sheepskin comprises a chemical treatments adapted to improve at least one of stain resistance or ultraviolet fading of said sheepskin.

101. (Previously presented) The saddle pad of Claim 87, wherein said second substantially flexible element comprises square quilted fabric, said fabric providing reduced bunching of the second element under said saddle during use.

102. (Previously presented) The saddle pad of Claim 87, wherein said sheepskin comprises Australian Merino sheepskin.

103. (Currently amended) Saddle pad apparatus adapted to support a saddle, comprising:

a first pad disposed laterally to one side of said spine and a second pad disposed laterally to the other side of said spine, said first and second pads straddling said spinal column at a predetermined distance, said predetermined distance sufficiently distant so that said saddle pad apparatus does not impede movement of the spinal column of said living subject by forming a space between said spinal column and said saddle pad apparatus; and

wherein each of said first and second pads comprises a predetermined shape, said predetermined shape being disposed within a respective one of a withers region gap or recess occurring in the anatomy of said living subject, said disposing of said first and second pads within respective ones of said withers region gaps or recesses causing ~~such that~~ said saddle and saddle pad apparatus ~~is~~ to be raised at least partly off of only said withers region of said subject.

104. (Currently amended) A saddle pad adapted for use with a saddle on a high-withered equine, said high-withered equine having a plurality of gaps in its withers region, comprising:

first and second substantially flexible elements having roughly the same shape, said first and second elements being bound together in at least a plurality of locations along their periphery, said first element comprising a sheepskin and being in direct contact with the skin of said equine; [[and]]

a first plurality of compressible visco-elastic foam pad elements disposed between said first and second ~~flexibly~~ flexible elements, said first plurality of pad elements straddling the spine of said equine at a distance whereby said saddle pad is not in contact with the spinal column of said equine during riding; and

a second plurality of compressible visco-elastic foam pad elements disposed between said first and second flexible elements;

wherein said second plurality of pad elements are disposed within respective ones of said plurality of gaps and ~~comprise~~ comprising a three dimensional profile, said three dimensional profile fitting only within respective ones of said gaps; and

wherein said second plurality of pad elements are continuously disposed within said plurality of gaps and cause at least a front portion of said saddle pad and said saddle to be continuously elevated away from said withers.

105. (Currently amended) A saddle pad adapted for use, with a saddle, on an equine, comprising:

first and second substantially flexible elements having roughly the same shape, said first and second elements being bound together in at least a plurality of locations along their periphery, said first element comprising sheepskin in direct contact with the skin of said equine and said second element comprising a fiber-based material disposed to contact said saddle;

a plurality of compressible visco-elastic foam pad elements disposed between said first and second flexible elements, a first group of said plurality of pad elements having a first shape and adapted to straddle the spine of said equine with at least a portion of said plurality disposed within said saddle pad, said first group of said plurality of pad elements supporting said saddle and said saddle pad above the spine of said equine thereby creating a spinal channel, said spinal channel ~~and sufficiently distant from said spine such that~~ enabling the movement of the spine of said equine ~~is~~ to be substantially unimpeded by said saddle and said first group of said plurality of pad elements during riding[[,]];

first and second restraining straps affixed to at least said second flexible element, said straps each being adapted for substantially concealed tethering to said saddle; ~~and~~

at least one peripheral ridge disposed substantially along a front or back periphery of said first and second elements, said peripheral ridge cooperating with an edge of said saddle to substantially frustrate relative motion between said saddle pad and said saddle in at least one direction during riding; and

a second group of said plurality of pad elements, ~~wherein~~ said second group of said plurality of pad elements ~~comprise~~ comprising a profile that interfaces continuously only with gaps formed in the withers region of said equine ~~so as to prop up only a front portion of said saddle and saddle pad~~;

wherein continuous placement of said second group of said plurality of pad elements substantially causes said saddle and said saddle pad to be propped up, said first and second groups of said plurality of pad elements cooperating to maintain balance and stability of said saddle for a rider.